

GROUP 4

ANDREE GEULEN HERSCOVICI



Andree Geulen in Brussels during German occupation

"I was a young woman. No different than others. Not better, not worse. Life left me distant from the upheaval going on around me," said the teacher Andree Geulen Herscovici years after the Holocaust. What motivated a 20-year-old woman to change the course of her life, which had been tranquil to that point, and join the ranks of an underground whose aim was to fight the Germans in order to save Jewish children? From the first time Andree saw a child humiliated by racial laws, she began to act and was incapable of stopping. She dedicated her life to this cause, and when she would go to bed each evening she would say to herself before falling asleep: "We saved five children, five more children were not exiled."

Like most Belgians, Andree, a young teacher at the local school, did not pay much attention to the anti-Jewish measures and persecution taking place in her country. One day, one of her students showed up wearing a Jewish star on his clothing. This sight shook her to the core. She immediately instructed all her students to wear aprons to school, to cover the humiliating sign forced on the Jews. At least within the walls of the school, the Jewish student could be protected from humiliation. This was a life lesson for the other students, and everyone obeyed her instruction.

Acts like these quickly became insufficient for young Andree. She was fully committed to "opposing the never-ending outrage of racism," as she described it. She met Ida Sterno, a Jewish member of the clandestine organization Comité de Défense des Juifs – Jewish Defense Committee – who brought her into its ranks. Ida needed a non-Jewish partner who would help her accompany Jewish children to their hiding places, and Andree needed a framework in which she could act and assist. Andree was given a code name – Claude Fournier – and was told leave her parents' home and move to the boarding school where she was teaching. The Gaty de Gamont School was deeply involved in hiding Jewish children. At the initiative of the headmistress Odelle Oubart, twelve Jewish students were hidden at the school at a time when there were not many safe places for Jewish children.

In May 1943, the Germans raided the school in the middle of the night. It was during Pentecost – all non-Jewish students were spending the holiday with their families at home, while the Jewish children who had nowhere to go stayed behind at school. The Jewish children were dragged out of their beds and interrogated about their identity. The children were immediately arrested and the teachers also taken for interrogation. When the German interrogator looked Andree in the eye and scornfully asked if she wasn't ashamed to teach Jews, she responded without hesitating: "Aren't you ashamed to make war on

Jewish children?"

Andree managed to evade arrest, but the night took its toll. The headmistress and her husband were arrested and deported to concentration camps in Germany, where both died. They were later recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations.

After that traumatic evening, Andree went from house to house among her Jewish students, telling them what had happened and warning them not to return to school. She knew the Germans were liable to return. Her involvement with rescue deepened further, and she now embarked on a clandestine existence. She rented an apartment under a false name, which she shared with Ida Sterno. Contact with the rescue organizations was maintained through secret post office boxes, one of which was located in an antique shop. From there information and orders were passed, and Andree's activities continued undiminished. For over two years, she visited Jewish homes and extended her hand to the children, without being able to tell their parents where she was taking them. The children would hold her hand in theirs, and with their other hand clutch a suitcase of treasures that their mothers had tearfully packed. Andree often sang to the children, and today believes that the children remembered this pleasantness amidst the fear and uncertainty associated with those days. Sometimes she would take children as young as two or three years old. She would drill into her memory the false names of the hidden children and their addresses – information with life and death consequences. In secret, she prepared lists with the real names of hundreds of hidden children, some of whom never saw their parents again. In doing so, she preserved the children's Jewish and family identity, which depended entirely on her ability to recall, as young children forget these details easily. Parents begged to know where she was taking their children, but she could not reveal her hiding places. She learned that if she did, the parents would not be able to resist visiting the areas where their children were in hiding, thus putting them all at risk. While Andree herself visited these houses, it often happened that a raid would take place: blocked streets, soldiers everywhere, and trucks waiting to take away the innocents caught by the Gestapo. In these circumstances, she managed to save a few children. She would cross over the checkpoints, with one child in a stroller and others holding her hand, looking like a young mother of several children. The soldiers were embarrassed to confront her and in this way, she saved the hidden children, though sadly not their parents. When she managed to save a child, she felt a great sense of satisfaction and an uplifting of her spirits. Years later, she compared the feeling to raising children of her own.

One time, a passerby stopped Andree as she was walking with a Jewish child, and innocently asked the child's name. The child looked at her and whispered, "Should I give

my real name or my fake name?" It was a terrifying moment. Andree gestured to the child to be silent, and not say anything.

In May 1944, Ida Sterno was arrested and sent to the Mechlin transit camp, from which Jews were sent to Auschwitz. Although Andree 's life was in great danger, she visited Ida in the camp, granting her a few extra moments of humanity and friendship.

The young teacher acted to save Jews until the last day of the war, and was a member of a network of underground groups. Most of the children did not know that their rescue was part of these groups, nor did they know that Madame Andree Guelen was responsible for their rescue. Henri Novak, one of the rescued children, later related: "About a decade ago, while visiting with my wife in Brussels, my cousin invited me to Shabbat dinner at a Jewish club. The hall was full and someone asked me if I knew Madame Guelen. I answered that I had never heard the name. 'Come let me introduce you,' he said. We went to the table, and sitting there was a woman I did not know. My friend said to her "Madame Guelen, I want to introduce to you my friend from Israel. The woman raised her head and asked my name. 'My name is Henri Novak,' I said. She gave me a long look and said '1059'. I was stunned. I said her 'Excuse me, to what are you referring?' She replied 'That was your code number during the war. We took care of you after your parents were no longer around.' From that moment, everyone became clear to me. I learned things that I hadn't known for a long time."

Many years after the Holocaust, Andree Guelen visited Jerusalem to attend a conference of children hidden in Belgium, and there she proclaimed in front of all: "I loved you all so much then, and I still love you so much today."

Discussion Questions:

- What motivated Andree Guelen's acts of rescue?
- Describe Andree Guelen: age, gender, political and religious outlook, etc.
- What difficulties and dangers did Andree Guelen face?
- Was the rescue a result of a one-time decision or perhaps was she called upon to take responsibility for rescuing at several points? If the latter, what were they?

